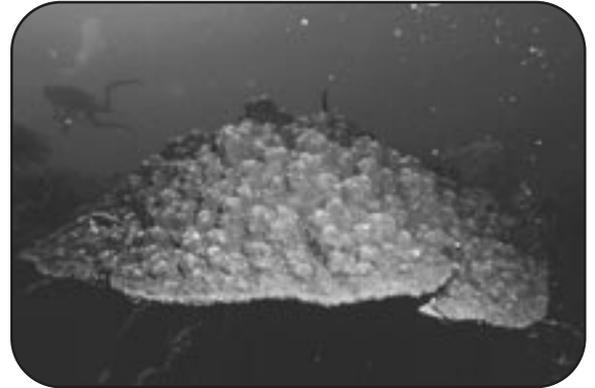




Plan Released for Tortugas Ecological Reserve

The Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve was released in May, triggering the start of a public comment period which will close on July 31, 2000. (See related information in this issue on how to comment.) The Draft SEIS details the alternatives being considered by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary for establishing a “no-take” ecological reserve in the westernmost portion of the Sanctuary, including the preferred alternative unanimously approved by the Tortugas 2000 Working Group and Sanctuary Advisory Council last summer.



Scientists believe that low sunlight and strong currents sculpt the unusual coral formations found on Tortugas reefs. Mushroom-shaped corals such as these led scientists to name one area Sherwood Forest.

The Sanctuary’s proposal involves establishing a 151 square nautical mile no-take ecological reserve to protect the critical coral reef ecosystem of the Tortugas. Working in cooperation with the State of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, the proposal involves expanding the Sanctuary boundary to the north and west, to encompass Sherwood Forest and adjacent coral reef areas. It also includes creating a noncontiguous section of the Sanctuary that captures Riley’s Hump and deepwater shelf areas to the south.

The proposed reserve would consist of two sections, Tortugas North and Tortugas South. Tortugas North, 91 square nautical miles, would include, Sherwood Forest, an area of lush coral growth, as well as the northern half of Tortugas Bank, an extremely productive area of the Sanctuary.

Tortugas South would consist of 60 square nautical miles of federal waters that would protect Riley’s Hump, an important spawning site for snapper and grouper. The proposed reserve would extend protection to Riley’s Hump year-round and would also include valuable deepwater habitat for golden crab, tilefish, and snowy grouper.

The Sanctuary’s ecological reserve regulations would be applied to the Tortugas reserve, protecting marine life and prohibiting anchoring and vessel discharge. Mooring buoys would be installed to allow vessels to use the area without harming coral or other organisms on the seafloor. Access to both sections of the reserve would be through a no-cost, phone-in permit system, to facilitate enforcement and promote conservation of the Tortugas marine resources.

An ecological reserve in the Tortugas would help preserve the richness of species and health of fish stocks in the Tortugas and throughout the Florida Keys, helping to ensure the stability of commercial and recreational fisheries. The reserve would protect important spawning areas for snapper and grouper, as well as deepwater habitat for other species. Restrictions on vessel discharge and anchoring would protect water quality and habitat complexity, including significant protection for the unique coral reef resources of the area. The proposed reserve’s geographical isolation would help scientists distinguish between natural and human-caused changes to the coral reef environment, as well as complement the network of existing no-take zones within the Sanctuary. The marine resources of the Tortugas are the crown jewel of the Florida Keys and represent one of the Keys’ last wild ocean places. We encourage you to be a part of this unique project by providing your input on the ecological reserve alternatives contained within the Draft SEIS. This proposal would ensure that the beautiful coral communities and other marine habitats of the Tortugas would be protected in perpetuity for this and future generations.

*Note: This article appeared in the Summer 2000 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: floridakeys.noaa.gov.*